

Every year, Fire Prevention Week focuses national attention on the importance of practicing fire safety to reduce fire injuries, deaths, and destruction. This year's campaign – Get out! Stay out! – reminds us of two simple but life-saving lessons:

1. install smoke alarms and test them regularly; and
2. develop and practice home fire drills.



Fire Prevention Week was established to commemorate the Great Chicago Fire, the tragic 1871 conflagration that killed more than 250 people, left 100,000 homeless, destroyed more than 17,400 structures and burned more than 2,000 acres. The fire began on October 8, but continued into (and did most of its damage on) October 9, 1871.

According to popular legend, the fire broke out after a cow – belonging to Mrs. Catherine O'Leary – kicked over a lamp, setting first the barn, then the whole city on fire. Chances are you've heard some version of this story yourself; people have been blaming the Great Chicago Fire on the cow and Mrs. O'Leary for more than 130 years. But recent research by Chicago historian Robert Cromie has helped to debunk this version of events.



The accused:
Mrs. O'Leary's cow

Like any good story, the 'case of the cow' has some truth to it. The great fire almost certainly started near the barn where Mrs. O'Leary kept her five milking cows. But there is no proof that O'Leary was in the barn when the fire broke out – or that a jumpy cow sparked the blaze. Mrs. O'Leary herself swore that she'd been in bed early that night, and that the cows were also tucked in for the evening.

But if a cow wasn't to blame for the huge fire, what was? Over the years, journalists and historians have offered plenty of theories. Some blamed the blaze on a couple of neighborhood boys who were near the barn sneaking cigarettes. Others believed that a neighbor of the O'Leary's may have started the fire. Some people have speculated that a fiery meteorite may have fallen to earth on October 8, starting several fires that day – in Michigan and Wisconsin, as well as in Chicago. Whatever the cause, it was a devastating tragedy ... and it's been used annually since 1920 as a springboard for public fire safety awareness.

Learning from the Mistakes of Others



My father once told me, it's okay to make a mistake, as long as you learn how to avoid making it a second time. His follow-up wisdom suggested that it's even better to learn from the mistakes of others. With that piece of advice in hand, let's examine some public fire statistics to see what types of mistakes are being made repeatedly.

- In 2000, 3,420 people died in home fires, **an increase of 18.1 percent over the previous year.**
- A working smoke alarm is not present in two-thirds of residential fires in which a child is injured or killed, according to the National SAFE KIDS Campaign. **This statistic hasn't changed for more than 20 years, although the number of households with a non-working detector now outnumbers those that have no smoke alarms at all.**
- Children ages five and under are more than twice as likely to die in home fires than any other age group, according to the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA). **This has been true since at least 1980.**
- For children under the age of five, playing with matches and lighters is the leading cause of fire deaths and injuries, according to the NFPA. Careless smoking is the leading cause of residential fires and fire-related deaths for all ages, according to the USFA. **Have we learned nothing over the past 25 years?**
- Most fire fatalities occur between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. The majority of all fatal fire victims were asleep at the time of the fire, underscoring the importance of working smoke detectors.
- The leading cause of home fires and related injuries is home-cooking equipment. However, most fire-related deaths are from residential fires ignited by smoking materials such as cigarettes. **When will people start paying attention to these statistics?**



So why do people keep making these tragic mistakes? There are many reasons, I'm sure, but several seem to prevail:

1. People hear or read about a tragedy but are not aware of what caused it in the first place (and therefore don't learn how to prevent it from happening to them);
2. People underestimate or simply don't recognize every hazard and risk;
3. People believe that terrible things happen to other people.

Let's examine these.

First, seeing the results but not understanding the cause. While reviewing the archives for some notable case studies, I was reminded of such horrific events as the Cocoanut Grove Nightclub fire (Boston, 1942, 492 dead), the MGM Grand fire (Las Vegas, 1980, 84 dead), the Imperial Food Products, Inc. fire (Hamlet, NC, 1991, 25 dead), or this winter's Station Nightclub fire (Warwick, RI, 2003, 100 dead). Horrible losses were suffered in each, but what lessons did we learn? What will be done so that others don't suffer? Unfortunately, those lessons aren't always conveyed by the media. Even when they are, those lessons don't usually get front-page coverage. Eventually the stories pass silently from our memories, only to be replaced by yet another unnecessary tragedy, the cause of which is often reported so late in the game that it fails to catch the reader's attention. And so the cycle continues. (**Note:** if you are interested in the events and decisions that caused these and other tragedies, let me know. I may decide to post a follow-up "history lesson" in the near future.)

Second, underestimating or failing to recognize a hazard. When a smoke alarm sounds, how long do you suppose you have to safely evacuate your home? Ten minutes? Five minutes? Would you believe two minutes?? After that, the fire, smoke, and poisonous gases generated in a "typical" living room fire will overwhelm you and impede your egress. That assumes, of course, that you have smoke detectors and that they're functioning! Two minutes isn't much time ... just enough to get you and your family safely out of the house. You can pretty much forget saving any of your valuables. Underestimate the speed and fury of fire and it may be the last mistake you ever make.



Have you ever removed (and forgotten to replace) a smoke detector's battery after burning dinner in the oven? Do you ever smoke in bed? Do you allow clutter on your stairs and in the halls? Do you ever leave food cooking unattended? Do you store flammable liquids anywhere in your living quarters?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you're playing with fire (excuse the pun). These are all risky behaviors, and history has demonstrated this to us again and again. Does this list of behaviors represent every cause of fire? Of course not, but getting our hands around these few would save a significant number of lives and properties each year.

Third, assuming that bad things only happen to other people. I'm sure you've seen lists similar to the previous one before. I'm sure you've acknowledged that each behavior is unsafe. And yet I'm also sure that many of you fail to curb these behaviors, knowing full well that they have proven costly to other people. So why do you ignore history? Why do you pass up the opportunity to learn from others' mistakes? The answers could fill a college psychology textbook, but allow me to list a few reasons:

- You've done it for years, and nothing bad ever came of it.
- It's an inconvenience to do it more safely.
- It's my life – I can behave however I choose.
- It will never happen to me.

All of these reasons (excuses) are full of holes, but let me say this about the last bullet: to everyone else, you are the other guy. Don't assume that terrible things always happen to other people. There are plenty of good, innocent people who have proven that wrong.



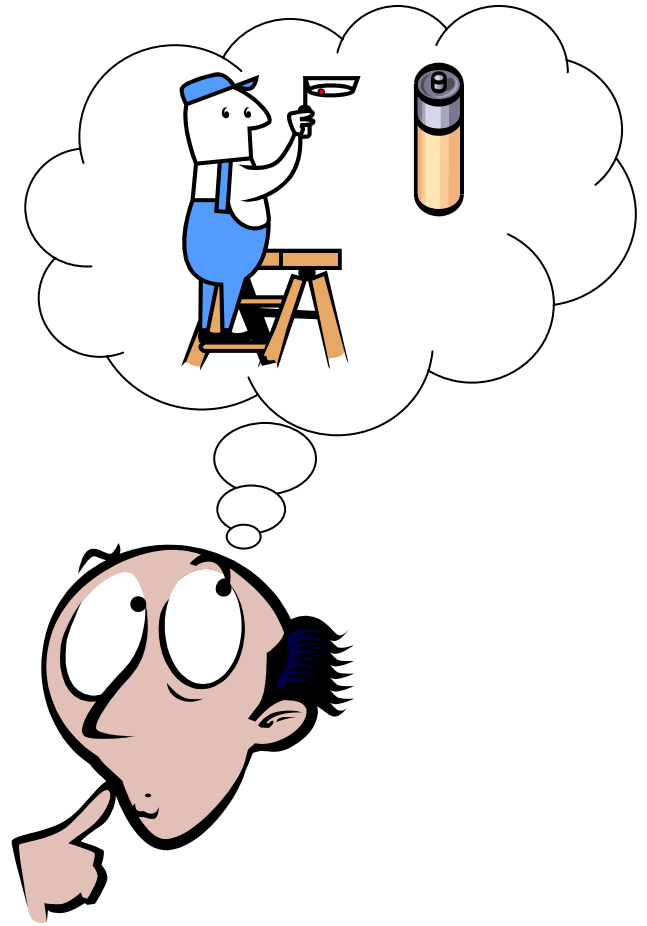
George Santayana once said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Don't become a statistic. Learn from the mistakes of those who have come before us. Install smoke detectors. Change the batteries every year. Practice exit drills with your family.

Plan to stay alive.

Fire Safety Tips for the Home

I suggest you take this simple list home this evening and, so as not to repeat history, pull it out occasionally to refresh your memory. Remember, learn from the mistakes of others.

- Never let your cooking go unattended.
- Test your smoke detectors monthly and change the batteries annually.
- Practice “Exit Drills In The Home” (EDITH) with your family.
- Know how to use a fire extinguisher before you actually need one.
- Never smoke in bed.
- Keep matches and lighters out of your children’s reach.
- Don’t overload outlets, don’t use damaged electrical cords, and don’t run electrical cords under carpets or rugs.
- Never store flammable chemicals (e.g., gasoline or propane) in your living quarters.
- Keep your means of egress uncluttered.



Pop Quiz



Have you ever read “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten”? I never did, but I do understand its message. Perhaps we could all stand to revisit the innocence of our youth where we learned some of life’s simplest but most valuable lessons. With Fire Prevention Week on my mind, I can’t help but think that we could take lessons from our children. Thanks to their teachers, they all know how to leave school quickly but orderly; they know where to assemble outside; they know to crawl low under smoke; they know to “stop, drop, and roll” if their clothes catch fire ... By contrast, I have watched adults ignore fire alarms by hiding in the restroom; I’ve watched them wander aimlessly outside, unaware of the importance of accounting for every person; I’ve seen them block emergency exits with boxes, tables, and even washing machines; I’ve seen them throw water on a grease fire ... So tell me, what happens between childhood and adulthood?

Well, do yourself a favor. Sit down with your kids tonight and take this quiz:

<http://www.nfpa.org/sparky/cool.html>

It’s from the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), the nation’s preeminent authority on fire, electrical, and life safety code development, research, and public education. Your kids will enjoy it, and you might just learn something from them. Then again, if you keep your mind open, they can teach you something new every day.



FEMA Kicks Off Public Safety Campaign to Reduce Fire Deaths of Babies and Toddlers

WASHINGTON, D.C. - The Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) announced today a campaign to raise awareness about the increased risk of fire death for young children, and to teach parents and caregivers how they can avoid the tragedy. The campaign's message emphasizes installing smoke alarms, securing lighters and matches, and developing a fire evacuation plan under the theme: "Prepare. Practice. Prevent the Unthinkable."

"A baby or toddler under age five dies nearly every day in a residential fire," said Homeland Security Under Secretary Michael D. Brown. "These young children have a disproportionately higher risk of fire death than the rest of the population. They depend on their parents and caregivers to keep them safe, to prevent residential fires from starting, and to increase the chances that the entire family can escape a fire quickly and safely."

From 1989 through 1998, U.S. children younger than age five were twice as likely as the rest of the population to die in a residential fire; in that decade 5,830 children died in fires in this country, according to the U.S. Fire Administration, part of FEMA and the initiator of the campaign.

"No child -not a single one- should suffer such an awful death, a death that can be prevented by parents who take the necessary precautions," said Fire Administrator R. David Paulison. "Every parent and every caregiver with young children depending on them must take a few simple but important steps to prevent this tragedy. Even toddlers can be taught how to quickly respond in case of fire and adults need to know how they will escape with infants."

The Fire Safety Campaign for Babies and Toddlers includes four national partner organizations that have pledged to spread the message to parents and caregivers, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, ZERO TO

THREE, National SAFE KIDS Campaign and the National Fire Protection Association.

The campaign materials include a print public service announcement, an educational video on fire safety for babies and toddlers, posters, brochures and fact sheets. The media, parents and caregivers can access the information, in both English and Spanish, at www.usfaparents.gov or can order materials through the U.S. Fire Administration's Publications Online Catalog, at www.usfa.fema.gov/applications/publications/.

The U.S. Fire Administration has a mission to reduce life and economic losses due to fire and related emergencies through leadership, advocacy, coordination and support. It is the federal leader in public fire education and awareness, fire service training, fire-related technology and data collection.

On March 1, 2003, FEMA became part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. FEMA's continuing mission within the new department is to lead the effort to prepare the nation for all hazards and effectively manage federal response and recovery efforts following any national incident. FEMA also initiates proactive mitigation activities, trains first responders, and manages Citizen Corps, the National Flood Insurance Program and the U.S. Fire Administration.